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Helping High School Students Understand Academic Integrity

KATE KESSLER

It had to happen. I feel fortunate that it hasn't happened before now. I am sitting in an office with another professor as he confronts an obviously terrified student about her obviously plagiarized term paper. Witnessing. There is little question about the paper's true source: the professor holds a downloaded Web copy identical to hers. Though his assignment was original enough, her fulfillment of that assignment was not. She does not know what to say, afraid of incriminating herself, afraid of not answering. She covers her mouth with one hand and nods mutely. ■ Though I am convinced about the seriousness of her offense,

I am nevertheless in empathic agony with her. I wish so much this hadn't happened. The shock of this scene convinces me that we teachers should do all we can to help our students avoid similar scenes. For me, the first step is discussion.

"'Cheating.' The word sounds incredibly cheap and sinful." One student begins our discussion about cheating with this onomatopoeic description. She continues, "I honestly can't recall any instances of cheating in high school, probably because I don't remember getting caught in the act." Students often steer class discussion toward the topic of cheating, and after that agonizing conference I, too, am eager to talk about it.

Sally goes on to confess about an experience in high school:

Our teacher, Mrs. Gregory, should have retired years ago. In the middle of a lecture, she'd pause and start talking about her cat, Thomas. When we took tests, she sat at her desk and did crossword puzzles. After the first test, when I got a "D" and everyone else got an "A," I "got smart" too. I began making my own cheat sheets like everyone else. It was so easy to get away with. It seemed stupid not to do it.

Her enormous chestnut eyes look up with a flash of fear, checking to see if her classmates will criticize her. Then Ken chimes in:

Cheating in high school was an almost necessary evil. It was hard to watch some other student get "help" on a quiz and not want to help yourself. Unfortunately, your class rank and GPA are weighted on whether you cheated or not. Cheating is a way of survival in high school. You'd see students exercising silent cheating techniques that took years of practice to perfect. There were the lip readers, the over-the-shoulder readers, and even the sign language users. I preferred a stick of gum myself. Just write the vocab words on it and when the teacher comes around, stick it in your mouth. Sometimes I'd ask myself, "Wouldn't it be easier to just study than to go through all this hassle?"

"Nah," I'd think as I held up my pencil in the 6:00 position to signal that the answer to number twelve was "C."

Fourteen years as a public high school English teacher gave me plenty of experience with the motives for and mechanics of academic dishonesty. My first year as an assistant professor in higher education, however, has offered me fresh insights into

students' attitudes about what we commonly call cheating. I am in an interesting position, able to observe students as they make the transition from high school to college. Since I have just moved from high school to college myself, I feel like a matriculating teacher. Before I become too acclimated to my new teaching environment and forget where my freshmen students have come from, I want to share some insights into a change students say they experience during their transition, one of those changes that distinguishes college freshmen from high school seniors: their concern over cheating. Sharing information that college freshmen reveal to me can help teachers in secondary education prepare their students for the transition from high school to college in regard to academic integrity. Three areas of student concern are the differences in punishment for cheating, the differences in perception of what constitutes cheating, and the differences in their own attitudes about cheating.

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First, college freshmen quickly become concerned with the different and sometimes draconian ramifications of being caught cheating, which are clear and explicit in campus honor codes. These punishments are quite a shock to most freshmen. On many campuses, students are lucky to only fail the course if they are caught cheating. At some colleges, a first violation can result in expulsion.

Second, students quickly become concerned, and sometimes confused, about what constitutes cheating. While punishments for it are clear, there are areas of confusion regarding the technical definitions of cheating. Nowhere is that confusion more evident than when navigating through the myriad definitions of plagiarism.

Third, refreshingly, students become concerned about adopting new attitudes toward cheating. While in high school the vast majority of students say cheating is so common that it is "stupid not to," college appears to be a place of ethical transition. I see students begin to approach their studies with independent and responsible attitudes.

As a writing program professor who teaches primarily freshman composition students, I am in a fortunate position to listen to and assist students as they progress from high school to college expectations, all relating to increased independence and responsibility. Because I encourage students to choose writing topics that have meaning for them, I read a lot about the conflicts that increased independence and responsibility cause. Some are expected: Should I drink? Have sex? Go to class? A definite pattern emerges that surprises me, however. Fully a third of my freshman students regularly choose to write about the differences between cheating in high school and college. Since we discuss what students have written, we spend significant classroom time talking about the quantum leap between high school and college expectations of academic integrity. Following are three areas of concern about cheating that freshmen encounter.

Punishments Change

College honor codes have college freshmen scared to death. Honor codes have definitions of cheating as well as explicit warnings about what will happen if a student is convicted of a violation. It is the warnings that scare them. Students have heard horror stories about what happens to those who get caught cheating. In fact, the act itself is now labeled differently: "cheating" is now called "academic misconduct."

Jay, newly separated from his home in Long Island, describes differences in punishment between high school and college academic misconduct:

One reason I think that people don't cheat in college is because the penalty if you get caught is very strict, and that's putting it mildly. Here you can be expelled if you get caught. In high school, I watched a teacher catch a student cheating. The punishment was minimal to say the least. The teacher didn't tear up the test or even give the student a zero. He made the student take the test over again after school. What kind of punishment is that? If all teachers were like that I would get caught on purpose to get the extra time to cram in notes from the kids who had already taken the test!

Mark Clayton in his essay “A Whole Lot of Cheatin’ Going On” verifies that high schools are rife with academic misconduct: “*Who’s Who Among American High School Students*, which lists 700,000 high-achieving students, surveyed these top performers last year and found that 80 percent said they had cheated during their academic careers” (187). Students agree, adding that GPAs are artificially inflated by cheaters. The perfect scores generated by cheaters compel normally honest students to cheat just to stay within bell curves for tests. Bell curves extrapolate into class grades and class ranks—admission standards for college entrance.

The temptation to cheat in high school is compounded by students’ repeated assertions that little, if anything, is done about cheating. “It’s like those truckers’ logs,” one student offers. “You only get fined \$50.00 if you get caught cheating [in driving logs]. You make ten times that driving over hours.”

It’s not like that in college. For example, the University of Virginia’s “Explanation of the Honor System” describes the three offenses that warrant permanent dismissal from the University: an intentional act of lying, cheating, or stealing. Three criteria determine whether or not an honor offense has occurred: “Was the act . . . committed? Was the act committed willfully or intentionally? Would open toleration of such an act impair the community of trust sufficiently enough to warrant permanent dismissal from the University?” (<http://scs.student.Virginia.EDU/~honor/intro/explain.html>). The first two questions are concrete, but the third is open to interpretation. Where interpretive questions are concerned, students need to be aware that members of honors councils don’t take positions on the council because they are soft on crime. Indeed, UVA is currently working to revoke diplomas of graduates retroactively charged with having cheated while at the university.

While honor codes may help prevent some students from academic misconduct, they are mainly about enforcement and punishment, not education and prevention. Mark dramatizes this in a freshman essay:

If Jarrett the high school student were caught looking up definitions in his biology book during the midterm, he would face having to call home, maybe a day or two of detention, and a failing grade on his test. If Jarrett the college student were caught doing the same thing during an exam at James Madison University, he would face being

kicked out of school (which would, in turn, permanently damage his academic record and future). Add to that the embarrassment of explaining to his family and friends why he is now working at McDonalds serving french fries. There may even be a trip to court, not to mention the amount of money lost in paying for tuition, room, and board.

High school teachers can help their students avoid the shock of differences between high school and college punishments for cheating by asking a college professor to visit their classes and speak about academic integrity at the college level. Colleges also have specifically trained personnel who serve on campus honor councils, which often have informative videos about campus honor codes they are eager to share. I believe they would see high school students as excellent audiences, since at least part of their work is preventive. E-mail addresses and phone numbers of honors council representatives can be found with other honor code information on campus Web sites.

High school teachers can also help their students by creating a clear and consistently enforced handout about what cheating is and how getting caught will affect them. Teachers could model this handout from honor codes that are easily accessible on college Web sites. I dislike the emphasis on punishment as opposed to learning, and I encourage giving students more information to help them avoid punishment. The more explicit the definitions and consistent the punishments for cheating are, the more students will realize that they are accountable for their own behavior. I think it is better for students to learn early, when punishments aren’t as severe as they can be in college. Students might also find an assignment meaningful if it asks them to explain how they feel about cheating and academic integrity.

College professors are not as tolerant as high school teachers of the usual excuses (“I was under so much pressure . . . my parents would kill me if I got less than an ‘A’ . . . I didn’t think this was *cheating* . . .”). While high school teachers are rightfully more nurturing and less punitive than college counterparts, students respond like any other life form: consistent reinforcement is much more effective in producing a desired behavior than intermittent reinforcement. Consistent adherence to academic integrity in high school prepares students for academic integrity in college.

Transitioning students who are not accustomed to practicing academic integrity are perhaps

rightfully frightened about cheating, but many honest students are concerned for another reason. They become confused about what constitutes cheating. According to Mark:

There were many levels of cheating in high school ranging anywhere from cheating on a test to copying homework, the kind of cheating that happened all the time. I did not see copying homework as actual cheating if the teacher had assigned a large amount of busywork . . . many teachers in high school only graded homework on its completion; they weren't actually grading us on our ability to do the work or what we had learned in class.

I grit my teeth when I hear such statements, but the apparent lack of feedback students have received for lesser plagiaristic offenses sends the signal that they are to be tolerated. Students come to college with the perception that there are levels of cheating, and they feel that some forms don't warrant much concern. It is sometimes a shock to learn that even "lesser" forms carry penalties. Students who simply download someone else's term paper know, of course, that what they are doing is wrong. The students I am most concerned about are those who need help discerning the myriad definitions of cheating.

Perceptions Change

Because punishments are clear and severe, a second area of concern to students arises: What, exactly, constitutes cheating? From what I've observed, the kind of cheating students have the most difficulty with is plagiarism. In its most concrete terms plagiarism means to claim as one's own someone else's words or ideas, a kind of literary theft. It also means to present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source. We all know that variations evolve, however. Where are lines drawn in authorship? One good discussion about plagiarism that teachers can direct their students to is Rebecca Moore Howard's *Standing in the Shadow of Giants: Plagiarists, Authors, Collaborators*. Another is Keith Hjortshøj's *The Transition to College Writing*. His chapter on "Theft, Fraud, and the Loss of Voice" defines and gives examples of the kinds of plagiarism students are likely to encounter. His advice is clear: read regulations carefully and ask questions for clarification.

In honor code terms "clarification" is synonymous with "authorization." Honor codes use the word "authorized" and its antithesis "unauthorized"

liberally in their definitions of what constitutes cheating. For example, in James Madison University's Honor Code the first example of academic misconduct reads, "Using unauthorized materials or receiving unauthorized assistance during an examination or in connection with any work done for academic credit." The term seems clear enough, yet students tell me they are shy about asking professors for clarification or authorization. Mark notes, "It's sometimes hard to tell if the teacher specifically wants you to *not* work with other people. I'm afraid to ask. I can't tell if working together to help each other is something a teacher would want or not." The old adage that it is easier to ask for forgiveness than permission seems to be their rule. That can prove disastrous in college.

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We can help students become comfortable asking clarifying questions in the classroom. If an assignment seems unclear, let us encourage students to ask questions. We might begin by referring to Edward White's *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating*, which advises teachers to use specific language when designing writing assignments. Teachers can use this text to create a handout that encourages students to become knowledgeable about the language of composition instruction. For example, White encourages teachers to use specifically directive words like "enumerate," "summarize," "review," "interpret," "define," "prove," or "demonstrate" rather than stock words like "discuss" or "comment." Stock words tell students to "file dump" (29–30). A handout that defines and gives examples of these terms will both inform students about and familiarize them

with the language of composition. Becoming familiar with such language gives students the knowledge necessary to ask clarifying questions that may shield them from plagiaristic practices. The more specific the language in an assignment, the more information students will be able to ask about.

Another way teachers can help their students examine what constitutes academic integrity is to create assignments that ask students to research honor codes of colleges they dream of attending. Because college selection falls to younger and younger students it is not unusual for high school freshmen to begin considering which colleges they want to apply to. From freshmen through seniors, high school teachers can design assignments that encourage inquiry into many aspects of college life, including what colleges mean by cheating. For example, how do high school punishments compare to college punishments for cheating? How do high school definitions compare to college definitions of cheating? How does the vocabulary used to explain punishments and definitions of cheating compare?

Researching honor codes can be an effective transition tool, and one area that teachers can direct their students to examine is the code's information on collaboration and collusion. I have found that one of the difficulties in deciding what constitutes cheating is that in college, even as students are exhorted to behave with academic integrity, many find themselves doing more group work than ever before. Students are sometimes confused by what is and is not acceptable during group work. While we teach our students that their writing must be their own, students themselves must negotiate boundaries between individual and collaborative work, especially as they relate to the honor code violation "collusion."

Teaching students how to avoid plagiarism by citing quotations, paraphrases, and summaries is a fairly simple endeavor; authorship claims when working collaboratively are more complex. Because freshman students work collaboratively in peer writing groups and in writing centers, students have particular difficulty differentiating between collaboration and collusion.

Essentially, the difference between collaboration and collusion is intent. To *collaborate* means to work jointly with others in an intellectual endeavor. This is good. To *collude* means to conspire or plot a secret agreement for an illegal or deceitful purpose. This is bad. Collusion is a form of cheating. The good advice to clarify with a professor whether

a particular form of assistance is "authorized" is simple enough when it comes to taking tests and doing in-class writing. It becomes more complicated when students compose collaboratively outside the classroom. High school teachers can explain that collusion may have occurred when students cannot explain what words mean or where ideas came from. Even though they may not have actually copied someone else's work, what they claim as their own may be a hodgepodge of other peoples' words and ideas. The first questions college professors ask when they suspect collusion are, How did you create this writing? Where did you get this idea? Why did you choose this word? When students cannot clearly articulate responses, we suspect collusion.

In order to prevent collusion we must insist that student authors document even informal sources in their work. For example, let's say that Kate wants to use Frank's term "insinuation infection" in her paper. She could cite that phrase in her sentence as follows: "A friend of mine who suffers chronic sinus infections recently coined the term 'insinuation infection,' which he uses to describe office rumor mongering" (Bates). Kate would then include an appropriate reference in her works cited page. That way, she maintains academic integrity and avoids the danger of collusion. Even though student intent might not be as deceitful as the definition implies, using others' work without documentation can be regarded as collusion and subject to judicial review.

Beyond collusion and beyond the classroom, plagiarism is coming under increasing scrutiny. We have recently seen accused authors denounced and their speaking engagements rescinded. I suggest sharing with students a news article about Doris Kearns Goodwin's tragic fall (Plagens and Peyser 71). No author wants to find herself in a discredited position, even inadvertently.

Student Attitudes Change

Students' third area of concern has to do with their own changing attitudes about cheating. During their transition from high school to college, students develop new attitudes, born of increased independence and responsibility. Watching college students as they make independent and responsible decisions is a little like watching children take their first steps. How different this new world must look to them!

While many say that cheating in high school was almost a joke to them, college students now

begin to voice their awareness of the dire consequences awaiting them if they engage in academic misconduct. And although the road to academic integrity may begin with threats of consequences, another phenomenon also takes place. Perhaps because college is a choice as opposed to a requirement, freshmen begin to examine critically their behavior and their responsibility for that behavior. This is especially true for academic integrity.

Sarah, in the last essay of her fall freshman semester, writes:

There is something here on campus that can help us all develop and practice those morals we know we already have. We just need a little help. That is the Honor Code. Our Honor Code says, "The honor council is committed to instilling, promoting, and upholding individual and collective academic integrity." This helps me take pride in my work. For me there is a difference between not cheating because I might get caught and not cheating because it's not the right thing to do. I guess I need to have that realization in my face. I asked a lot of people in my dorm if they had cheated in high school and they all said yes. This really did not surprise me. However, when I asked them if they had cheated so far here at college, no one said yes. They said they took the honor code seriously. Hearing this from so many of my friends made me pleased. One of my suitemates said, "High school was all about getting the grades for college. Now that we are in college, it's all about your life now." Here we aren't following the honor code just because it's written; we are following it because we want to become upstanding citizens and behave according to our individual beliefs. You're paying a lot of money to go here, and if you cheat, you are really just cheating yourself. Sure, we had an honor code in high school but nobody followed it so it had no moral feeling to it. High school was a joke that we didn't take seriously. Now we have a choice. Now we can make what we want of our lives.

Essays like Sarah's prompt me to refer students to Stephen Carter's book *Integrity*. Carter admonishes us that integrity means "(1) *discerning* what is right and what is wrong; (2) *acting* on what you have discerned, even at personal cost; and (3) *saying openly* that you are acting on your understanding of right from wrong" (161).

Jay, who had written that in high school he would have deliberated getting caught cheating just to give himself more time to get notes from fellow students, notes later that "One reason I don't cheat in college is that it feels just plain wrong. I would be so embarrassed if another student noticed me look-

ing off their paper. Here everyone wants to feel smart. You don't want to look like you can't do it on your own."

"Doing it on their own" is something that matters to freshmen. They must prove themselves this first year in college. How well I remember my frustration as a high school teacher wondering where the line was between "doing it for them" and "making them do it for themselves." The truth is teachers can do neither. What we can do is appeal to the best in our students. We can help bring the best out by preparing them. While I firmly believe that students must take responsibility for their actions, I also firmly believe that the better students are prepared to make informed decisions, the better those decisions will be.

While many say that cheating in high school was almost a joke to them, college students now begin to voice their awareness of the dire consequences awaiting them if they engage in academic misconduct.

To whom should the task of preparing students to make informed decisions regarding academic integrity fall? The most obvious choice, high school guidance counselors, fades when we consider how overburdened they are with administrative duties. They don't have time to counsel students about the honor code expectations they will face in college. Most certainly, English teachers are already asked to do much in addition to their own curriculum because English is the course that everyone must take. But I'll tell you a wonderful secret: when I ask students which teachers were the most positively influential to them, college freshmen overwhelmingly say that their English teachers taught them the most meaningful lessons in their lives. And so I ask that English teachers rise once again to meet the needs of their students.

As a former high school teacher who has “followed” her students to college, I can see that high school English teachers can teach their students an important lesson by insisting on academic integrity. They can teach their students another important lesson by encouraging them to examine exactly what academic integrity means. They can teach their students perhaps the most important lesson of all by fostering the attitude that academic integrity is both a choice and a responsibility. Carol Gilligan, in her chapter titled “Concepts of Self and Morality,” asserts that “the essence of moral decision is the exercise of choice and the willingness to accept responsibility for that choice” (172).

I wrote this article after witnessing a student being confronted with cheating. I needed to make some meaning of it. Why do some students think they can cheat? How can we help them understand what cheating is and how it can affect them? How can we encourage them to make responsible decisions regarding academic integrity? After reflection, I have come to believe that the best we can do is to inform our students in order to help them avoid academic misconduct.

We live in times when diplomas are revoked and careers are ruined when past cheating is revealed. Authors who have plagiarized see their work discredited and their speaking invitations withdrawn. Cheat in the Olympics and you can be disqualified, cheat on the job and you can be fired, cheat on your spouse and you can be divorced. Cheat in college and

you can be expelled. After students are fully informed about cheating, it is up to them to exercise choices regarding academic integrity. In college they will have to accept responsibility for those choices.

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EJ 20 YEARS AGO

In the “I” of the Storm

“Reading their first papers—and reading the dull, impersonal, spiritless essays written by future teachers for state certification examinations—has convinced us that a good deal of what is unappetizing about contemporary student prose is directly attributable to teachers forbidding students to write in the first person. Forbidden to associate with *I*, students fall into the company of passive verbs. Then they begin to experiment with circumlocutions (“Some comments in this essay will criticize . . .”) and move on to the hard stuff like excessive nominalization and abecedarian jargon (“The observance of personnel utilizing tobacco products was noted.”). Finally comes the inexorable decline into the lifeless depths of unpersoned, impenetrable, and unreadable *professional* prose.

James Hoetker and Barbara Hoetker Ash. “Why Can’t I Use *I*?” *EJ* 72.3: (1983): 110–12.
